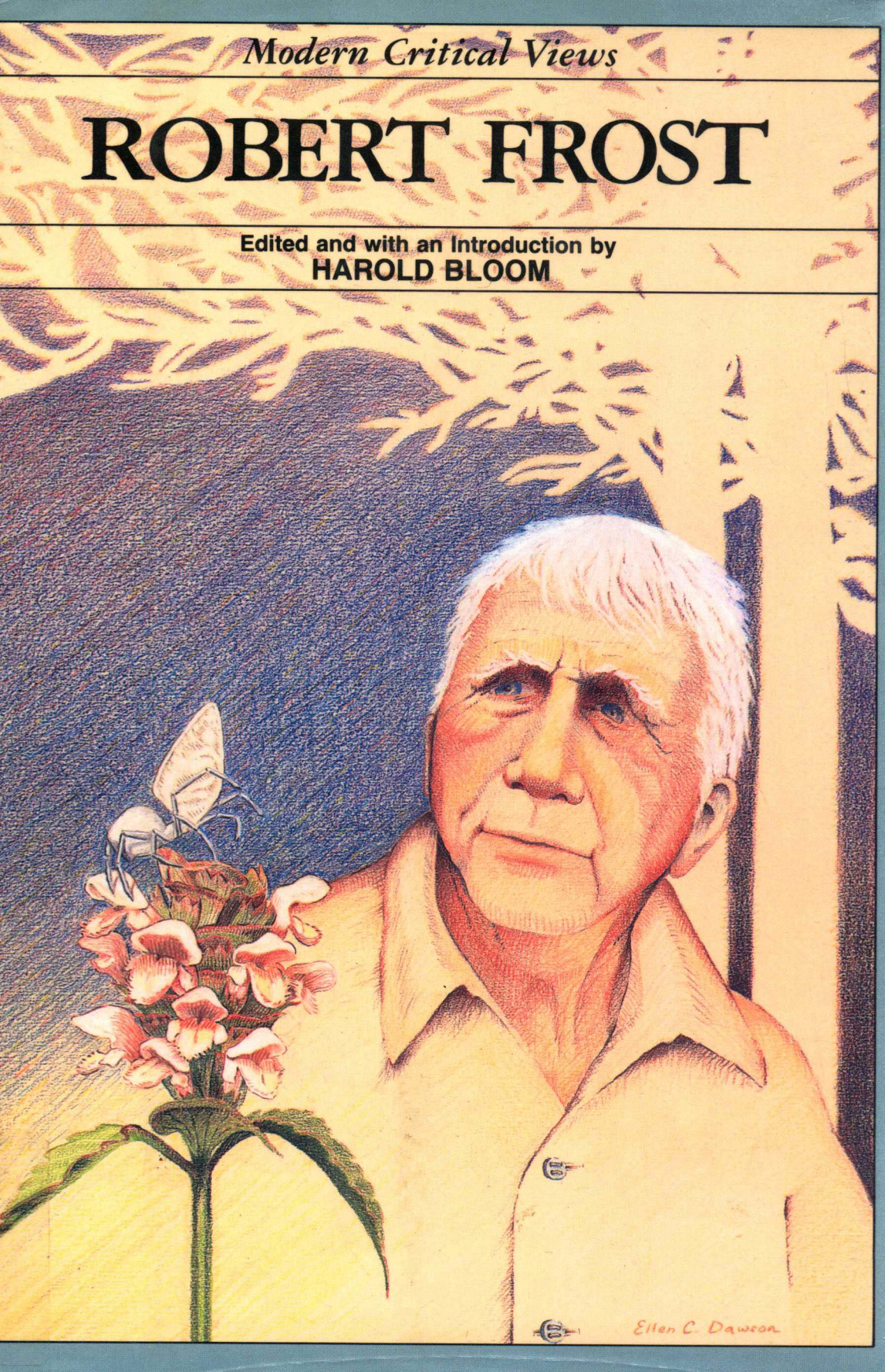
Modern Critical Views

ROBERT FROST

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism devoted to the poetry of Robert Frost, arranged in the chronological order of its original publication. I am grateful to Susan Lasher for her assistance in editing this volume.

The introduction explores some aspects of the influence of Emerson upon Frost, particularly in their shared gnosis of "the American religion." Robert Pack, Frostian poet and critic, begins the chronological sequence with a meditation upon Frost's deliberate distancing or "enigmatical reserve" in regard to his own poems. In a parallel discussion, Frank Lentricchia argues that Frost's sense of the limits of redemption that a poem can perform marks a crucial distance between the High Romantic theory of the imagination and a more limited modern sense of reduced imaginative possibility.

Richard Poirier, who seems to me Frost's canonical critic, traces the poet's crucial early choices that made him so distinctive a voice in American tradition. Poirier's conclusions are supported implicitly by Marie Borroff's sensitive discussion of Frost's language, with its rugged ability to achieve elevation by rising out of a basic simplicity.

Two very different approaches to the relation between Wordsworth and Frost are made by Sydney Lea and David Bromwich. Lea makes of the relation a subtle study in "purged aspiration," while Bromwich, in the broader context of adding Wallace Stevens to this contrast between poets, achieves the valid insight that Wordsworth differs most crucially from Frost and Stevens because of the presence, in his greatest poems, of figures "radically unassimilable to himself," such as the old Cumberland beggar, and the many other vagrants, beggars, lost children, bereaved women, and deranged souls who people the greatest modern poet's universe of feeling.

This book concludes with two recent essays that consider Frost's achievement in the context provided by contemporary advanced literary criticism. Herbert Marks, writing on Frost's elitist "counter-intelligence,"

finds in the poet an aggressive technique that enhances displacement or loss, while denying that Frost was a Gnostic, in an argument that I acknowledge as stimulating my own introduction to considerable disagreement. Finally, Charles Berger, in an essay published for the first time in this volume, studies Frost as a mythologist of origins, skeptical and supple, and cannily capable of achieving a saving distance from the fictions of his own poetic sources. The emphasis upon "Directive" as a central poem, by both Marks and Berger, repeats a concern for the poem that is expressed throughout this book, from the introduction to Berger's conclusion. It seems clear that Frost issued both a perpetual challenge and an ongoing directive to critics in his great poem, which will always stimulate fresh generations of commentary.

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Introduction

I

Frost—at his frequent best—rivals Wallace Stevens as the great American poet of this century. He does not much resemble Stevens, ultimately for reasons that have little to do with the "essential gaudiness" of much early Stevens, or even with the austere clairvoyance of the later Stevens, poet of "The Auroras of Autumn" and "The Rock." Both of those aspects of Stevens rise from a powerful, barely repressed influence-relationship to Whitman, a poet who scarcely affected Frost. Indeed, Frost's uniqueness among modern American poets of real eminence partly stems from his independence of Whitman. Eliot, Stevens, Pound, Hart Crane, W. C. Williams, Roethke—all have complex links to Whitman, covert in Eliot and in Stevens. Frost (in this like Whitman himself) is the son of Emerson, of the harsher Emerson that we begin only now to recover. Any deep reader of Frost understands why the poet of "Two Tramps in Mud Time" and "Directive" seriously judged Emerson's "Uriel" to be "the greatest Western poem yet." "Uriel's voice of cherub scorn," once referred to by Frost as "Emersonian scorn," is the essential mode of irony favored throughout Frost's poetry.

"Uriel" is Emerson's own irreverent allegory of the controversy set off by his "Divinity School Address." There are certainly passages in the poem that seem to have been written by Frost and not by Emerson:

> The young deities discussed
> Laws of form, and metre just,
> Orb, quintessence, and sunbeams,
> What subsisteth, and what seems.
> One, with low tones that decide,
> And doubt and reverend use defied,
> With a look that solved the sphere,
> And stirred the devils everywhere,
> Gave his sentiment divine

Against the being of a line.
"Line in nature is not found;
Unit and universe are round;
In vain produced, all rays return;
Evil will bless, and ice will burn."

At the center of this is Emerson's law of Compensation: "Nothing is got for nothing," as Emerson phrased it later, in the remorseless essay "Power," in his *The Conduct of Life*. The darker Emersonian essays—"Experience," "Power," "Circles," "Fate," "Illusions"— read like manifestos for Frost's poetry. Richard Poirier has demonstrated this in some detail, and I follow him here in emphasizing how pervasive and crucial the affinity between Emerson and Freud tends to be. If there is a particular motto that states the dialectic of Frost's best poems, then it is to be found in a formulation of Emerson's "Self-Reliance."

> Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim.

One thinks of the extraordinary early poem "The Wood-Pile" (1914), where the poet, "out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day," comes upon "a cord of maple, cut and split / and piled" and then abandoned:

I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labor of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

That "slow smokeless burning" is the metaphor for Emerson's "instant of repose," where power ceases. Frost's restless turnings are his most Emersonian moments, American and agonistic. His Job, in *A Masque of Reason*, puzzling over God's Reason, deliberately relates Jehovah's dialectic to that of Emerson's "Uriel":

Yet I suppose what seems to us confusion
Is not confusion, but the form of forms,
The serpent's tail stuck down the serpent's throat,
Which is the symbol of eternity
And also of the way all things come round,

Or of how rays return upon themselves,
To quote the greatest Western poem yet.
Though I hold rays deteriorate to nothing:
First white, then red, then ultrared, then out.

Job's last two lines here mark Frost's characteristic swerve away from Emerson, except that Emerson is the most difficult of fathers to evade, having been always so subtly evasive himself. Frost's authentic nihilism is considerable, but is surpassed by "Fate" in *The Conduct of Life*, and by a grand more-than-Frostian late entry in Emerson's Journals, set down in the autumn of 1866, when the sage felt burned to the socket by the intensities he had experienced during the Civil War:

> There may be two or three or four steps, according to the genius of each, but for every seeing soul there are two absorbing facts,— *I and the Abyss.*

Frost's religion, as a poet, was the American religion that Emerson founded. A latecomer exegete of that religion, I once offered its credo as *Everything that can be broken should be broken*, a Gnostic motto that eminently suits Frost's poetry, where God, whether in *A Masque of Reason*, *A Masque of Mercy*, or in "Once by the Pacific," is clearly animated neither by reason nor mercy but only by the blind necessities of being the Demiurge:

It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last *Put out the Light* was spoken.

A God who echoes Othello at his most murderous is himself also crazed by jealousy. Frost's celebrated negativity is a secularized negative theology, almost wholly derived from Emerson, insofar as it was not purely temperamental. Slyly aware of it, Frost used it as the occasion for lovely jokes, as in the marvelous "Two Tramps in Mud Time":

The water for which we may have to look
In summertime with a witching wand,
In every wheelrut's now a brook,
In every print of a hoof a pond.
Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath

That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth.

"Two Tramps in Mud Time" hymns the Emersonian negativity of refusing to identify yourself with any work, in order instead to achieve the Gnostic identity of the knower with what is known, when the sparks of the Alien God or true Workman stream through you. A shrewd Gnostic, Frost refuses to lament confusion, though he also will not follow Whitman in celebrating it. In Emerson's "Uriel," confusion precedes the dimming of that Miltonic archangel of the sun, who withers from a sad self-knowledge. Uriel-Emerson (for which read Frost) is himself not responsible for engendering the confusion, which results from the failure of nerve suffered by the heavenly powers when they hear Uriel proclaim that "all rays return; / Evil will bless, and ice will burn":

As Uriel spoke with piercing eye,
A shudder ran around the sky;
The stern old war-gods shook their heads,
The seraphs frowned from myrtle-beds;
Seemed to the holy festival
The rash word boded ill to all;
The balance-beam of Fate was bent;
The bounds of good and ill were rent;
Strong Hades could not keep his own,
But all slid to confusion.

"Confusion" is a mixing or pouring together of entities that would be better off if kept apart. Whether instinctively or overtly, both Emerson and Frost seem to have known that the Indo-European root of "confusion" originally meant "to pour a libation," as if to the gods. Frost's "form of forms," or confusion which is not confusion, identified by him with the Emersonian rays returning upon themselves, is a kind of libation poured out to the Alien God, as in the trope that concludes his great poem "Directive":

Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

II

"Directive" is Frost's poem of poems or form of forms, a meditation whose rays perpetually return upon themselves. "All things come round,"

even our mental confusion as we blunder morally, since the Demiurge is nothing but a moral blunderer. Frost shares the fine Emersonian wildness or freedom, the savage strength of the essay "Power" that suggests a way of being whole beyond Fate, of arriving at an end to circlings, at a resolution to all the Emersonian turnings that see unity, and yet behold divisions: "The world is mathematical, and has no casualty, in all its vast and flowing curve." "Directive" appears to be the poem in which Frost measures the lot, and forgives himself the lot, and perhaps even casts out remorse. In some sense, it was the poem he always wrote and rewrote, in a revisionary process present already in *A Boy's Will* (1913) but not fully worked out until *Steeple Bush* (1947), where "Directive" was published, when Frost was seventy-three. "The Demiurge's Laugh" in *A Boy's Will* features a mocking demonic derision at the self-realization that "what I hunted was no true god."

North of Boston (1914) has its most memorable poem in the famous "After Apple-Picking," a gracious hymn to the necessity of yielding up the quest, of clambering down from one's "long two-pointed [ladder] sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still." Frost's subtlest of perspectivizings is the true center of the poem:

> I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
> I got from looking through a pane of glass
> I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
> And held against the world of hoary grass.
> It melted, and I let it fall and break.

The sheet of ice is a lens upon irreality, but so are Frost's own eyes, or anyone's, in his cosmos. This supposed nature poet represents his harsh landscapes as a full version of the Gnostic *kenoma*, the cosmological emptiness into which we have been thrown by the mocking Demiurge. This is the world of *Mountain Interval* (1916), where "the broken moon" is preferred to the dimmed sun, where the oven bird sings of "that other fall we name the fall," and where the birches:

> shed crystal shells
> Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—
> Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
> You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.

Mountain Interval abounds in images of the shattering of human ties, and of humans, as in the horrifying "Out, Out—." But it would be redundant to conduct an overview of all Frost's volumes in pursuit of an experiential darkness that never is dispelled. A measurer of stone walls, as Frost names

himself in the remarkable "A Star in a Stoneboat," is never going to be surprised that life is a sensible emptiness. The demiurgic pattern of "Design," with its "assorted characters of death and blight," is the rule in Frost. There are a few exceptions, but they give Frost parodies, rather than poems.

Frost wrote the concluding and conclusive Emersonian irony for all his work in the allegorical "A Cabin in the Clearing," the set-piece of *In the Clearing* (1962), published for his eighty-eighth birthday, less than a year before his death. Mist and Smoke, guardian wraiths and counterparts, eavesdrop on the unrest of a human couple, murmuring in their sleep. These guardians haunt us because we are their kindred spirits, for we do not know where we are, since who we are "is too much to believe." We are "too sudden to be credible," and so the accurate image for us is "an inner haze," full kindred to mist and smoke. For all the genial tone, the spirit of "A Cabin in the Clearing" is negative even for Frost. His final letter, dictated just before his death, states an unanswerable question as though it were not a question: "How can we be just in a world that needs mercy and merciful in a world that needs justice." The Demiurge's laugh lurks behind the sentence, though Frost was then in no frame of spirit to indulge a demiurgic imagination.

Frost would have been well content to give his mentor Emerson the last word, though "content" is necessarily an inadequate word in this dark context. Each time I reread the magnificent essay, "Illusions," which concludes and crowns *The Conduct of Life*, I am reminded of the poetry of Robert Frost. The reminder is strongest in two paragraphs near the end that seem to be "Directive" writ large, as though Emerson had been brooding upon his descendant:

> We cannot write the order of the variable winds. How can we penetrate the law of our shifting moods and susceptibility? Yet they differ as all and nothing. Instead of the firmament of yesterday, which our eyes require, it is to-day an eggshell which coops us in; we cannot even see what or where our stars of destiny are. From day to day, the capital facts of human life are hidden from our eyes. Suddenly the mist rolls up, and reveals them, and we think how much good time is gone, that might have been saved, had any hint of these things been shown. A sudden rise in the road shows us the system of mountains, and all the summits, which have been just as near us all the year, but quite out of mind. But these alternations are not without their order, and we are parties to our various fortune. If life seem a

succession of dreams, yet poetic justice is done in dreams also. The visions of good men are good; it is the undisciplined will that is whipped with bad thoughts and bad fortunes. When we break the laws, we lose our hold on the central reality. Like sick men in hospitals, we change only from bed to bed, from one folly to another; and it cannot signify much what becomes of such castaways,—wailing, stupid, comatose creatures,—lifted from bed to bed, from the nothing of life to the nothing of death.

In this kingdom of illusions we grope eagerly for stays and foundations. There is none but a strict and faithful dealing at home, and a severe barring out of all duplicity or illusion there. Whatever games are played with us, we must play no games with ourselves, but deal in our privacy with the last honesty and truth. I look upon the simple and childish virtues of veracity and honesty as the root of all that is sublime in character. Speak as you think, be what you are, pay your debts of all kinds. I prefer to be owned as sound and solvent, and my word as good as my bond, and to be what cannot be skipped, or dissipated, or undermined, to all the *éclat* in the universe. This reality is the foundation of friendship, religion, poetry, and art. At the top or at the bottom of all illusions, I set the cheat which still leads us to work and live for appearances, in spite of our conviction, in all sane hours, that it is what we really are that avails with friends, with strangers, and with fate or fortune.